

# THE CONCERT

JOSEPH BERRY

THE SMALL, Quiet man sat before a great sparkling mirror and swore quietly as he rubbed prodigious quantities of rouge onto his sallow complexion. He surveyed his rosy cheeks in the glass, stood erect and made a mocking bow, very deeply, very slowly.

"And you also, you ass? I'm extremely delighted to hear you say so. Really, you're too kind. Really. Why, it couldn't have been that fine, you're just flattering me. You fool, you wouldn't know a bow from a mute. All you ever look at is my shoes. 'Performance in proportion to square of brilliance.' Is my tie on straight, Mr. Critic? The third movement would have been much better if my trousers had been creased, I admit. But all of us have our little faults, don't we?"

He smeared at his eyes with cream and powder, and slicked his hair into a dark sheen.

"Would they notice if I forgot my violin?"

He looked for his watch, failed to find it, and stepped into a backstage corridor from the small dressing-room to glance at the clock. Fifteen minutes. For the third time he went to the dressing-room of his accompanist, tried the locked door, peeked through the keyhole into darkness, and swore softly like a gentleman.

"Oh, that's quite all right. I didn't miss you during the first three minutes. Not at all. Glad you made it. Would you please wipe the foam off your shirt? That's good. Now here's the piano over here. No. Over here. Sit on the bench and put your fat fingers on the keys. Would you like to practice the Concerto once by yourself? Don't mind these people out here. They and I will wait for you. Wait and

wait. Three sharps. Four-four. Play as you have never played before, O pianist. Play as if you have never played before, O drunken master. Ah, the fortissimo! Does my violin annoy you? I shall play more softly, but I really must be heard. My name is on the banners outside. A mistake perhaps. Probably because I was the only one who came to dress rehearsal this afternoon. The manager's error, I suppose."

His eyes turned toward a shabby figure coming toward him over heaps of rope and boxes. The manager. Yes, lord and paymaster, I am fully and painfully cognizant of the irrevocable truth that it is now too late to commence the performance on time, in view of the fact that my besodden accompanist has not as yet made his appearance. And what the hell am I supposed to do about it? Seven minutes. But another pianist? From the conservatory... We can do nothing else. The Fates have us helpless in their unwashed hands. It took my Viennese boy two months to master the concerto. This man can sight-read it. Of course. He is from the conservatory... I shall first straighten my tie. I shall then repolish my shoes. I shall then tune my violin with the frayed A-string. I shall then wait and wait. When this man from the conservatory has arrived I shall step onto the stage and bow amid tumultuous applause. Little girls will whisper, 'He is second only to Heifetz.' The critics will say, 'Tonight may prove him second to none.' And that devil with the faultless ear will remember every note. Every note. If I trill a half step instead of a whole step he will mention it in his column. If I omit one note in that horrible scale he will pounce on it and drag it out into the light and soak it in melted brimstone. And

he is the lord of the critics. After the performance, young men hiding notebooks will crowd casually around his feet and look in another direction and say, 'Not bad, eh?' And they will write in their notebooks and thence into their columns whatever he does or says in the next ten minutes . . . So I must play perfectly. I must start ten minutes late with a strange accompanist and give a perfect performance. If I do not do so, I shall be forced to return to New York and make a living by teaching young men to use the fifth position as inoffensively as possible. I shall likely go mad, or perhaps madder. No madder. They will still fawn about me like — like fawns.

The footlights gleamed. Anticipatory applause. Deliberate delay. Brief announcement from the Head of the Conservatory . . . Curtain up. Step onto the stage, bow amid tumultuous applause. Deliberate delay. Opening chords and introduction.

That man is fine. I shouldn't be so prejudiced about conservatory men. He is doing a beautiful job. Now fiddle, artistically beneath chin. Delicate motion with bow. Really give now, boy. This has gotta be good.

The audience listened to the quiet, imperative voice of the violin, the complementary clusters from the piano. The accompanist recognized genius and bit his lip and played superbly. The violin grew impatient and ended the number in a sort of protesting compromise, having portrayed a complete emotional process in a psychologically perfect performance. And a note-perfect performance. The audience applauded quietly for a long time. The lord of the critics closed his own notebook and recognized genius.

Two more before the concerto. That pianist is the best I've ever heard. I'm lucky. He is a born accompanist. Lord,

what he could do with a few rehearsals. I am a little afraid of him.

Ready for the second number. No delay whatsoever. Managerial consternation. Light tones come from the violin, then a unified portrayal of momentarily frustrated joy, ending amid high clear laughter and unrestrained delight. Again the low intense applause. Another number, beautifully done. Three now, as close to absolute perfection as anyone in the world had ever done. The Concerto will tell if he is all-time tops. The Concerto will tell.

Slight delay, then into the first movement. Fine. On ahead.

My God.

That Missing Page.

The lord of the critics and the drunken accompanist are probably the only two men in America who are completely familiar with the Concerto. Why didn't I replace that page when that Viennese idiot told me it was gone? The critics! What shall I do when I come to that part? The critics! What shall I do when I come to that part? What will this pianist do? A little modulation to the next movement? The lord of the critics, and hence the critics, would know; besides, the unity of the whole thing would be destroyed. Will he try to follow me through that intricate tone-labyrinth? Only the same kind of genius who wrote it could do that successfully. Wrong notes, rough, uneven, soul-piercing harmonic flaws. There must be a part here to coincide with the theme of the whole Concerto. The original cannot be played under the present situation. The violinist and the pianist must, together, write and play extemporaneously for two long missing pages, and a lack of piano cues will prevent anything like the original. If I try to play the original the critic would recognize and realize the discrepancies. If the original is not reproduced in any way whatsoever, there is a chance in a thousand, however,



that the critics will not be aware of the substitution.

Piano interlude directly before the missing page. I pray, O pianist, save me, play with me and as I think. Piano chords departing from the still written music. He has noticed the absence of the page. He is ready for our improvisation. Time to play now. The Concerto will tell.

The lord of the critics fumbled at his moustache and said, "Good, good. Very good. Best ever of the Concerto. Best ever. Genius. Young genius, promising young genius." And the small quiet man bowed, very deeply, very slowly.

"I'm extremely delighted to hear you say so. Really, you're too kind. Really."

## AFTER DIANA

MARY WILEY

The clink of coffee-cups is pleasant here.  
See, I have drawn the curtains fast, and shut  
The moon's distracting light from our bright hearth.  
Your grave brown warmth is heightened so  
And I do not remember with such pain how sweet  
The star's carress falls on the traveller's face,  
When first he lifts it up to worship them.

But I am well content here by the fire  
To sit and sip and never contemplate  
The time the goddess took my hand and sat  
With me atop the hills, while down her back  
The long gold hair cascaded soft, and brushed  
With fire my tingling cheek, and reverent lips.

Oh it is very pleasant here indeed.  
I am well cushioned and well feathered now,  
And you who sit beside me here are all  
The things man takes to cherish and adore.  
But still, my love, your hair is dark, and there  
Is not the faintest glimmer of those pale  
And lovely strands that long ago were loosed  
To stroke my face. You are too kind to me;  
I grow quite fat and torpid, loving you.